

**A Work Project, presented as part of the requirements for the Award of a Masters
Degree in Management from the NOVA – School of Business and Economics.**

The Duality of Tensions at the Workplace for Female Leaders

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A Project carried out on the Human Resources course, under the supervision of:

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4th November 2016

Abstract

The qualitative research undertaken was set out to understand the challenges experienced by female leaders at the workplace. Therefore, semi-structured interviews with 12 female leaders in top management positions from different industries were conducted. As a consequence, a duality between tensions concerning 1) character traits, 2) beauty and 3) motherhood was confirmed through the experiences shared by the participants. Women identified these tensions as highly challenging and difficult to cope with, sometimes even slowing down their individual career progress. Moreover, the gender-pay gap was confirmed as a reality for women in most industries. In recent years, research on the issue of female leadership has become very popular. Nevertheless, very few publications can be found in the literature that discuss individual experiences within these tensions. Finally, the dualistic view used in the interpretation allowed to give implications for organisational change and a framework of coping mechanisms and corporate solutions is presented in order to resolve these tensions.

Keywords: tensions, duality, female leaders, character traits, appearance, motherhood penalty, corporate policies

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Prof. Filipa Castanheira (PhD) at Nova School of Business and Economics for her continuous support.

Prof. Castanheira was despite the geographical distance always available whenever I had a question about my research. I especially owe thanks to Prof. Castanheira for agreeing to supervise a topic I am truly passionate about and for allowing this thesis to be my own work, while still offering me valuable advice that steered me in the right direction. Obrigada.

Moreover, I would also like to thank the female professionals who were involved in the semi-structured interviews for this research project. Despite their strict schedules, these leaders made time to share their own accounts and experiences of tensions encountered during their career journeys. Without their passionate participation, this research could not have been conducted successfully.

Additionally, I wish to express my profound gratitude to my parents Johann and Andrea Haidinger as their support throughout my years of study was endless and kept me going. I would not have been able to accomplish this without their continuous support and love. Finally, I would like to dedicate this piece of work to my parents for raising their daughters as strong and independent women and for their continuous encouragement to always aim higher. Moreover, I wish to dedicate this thesis to my grandmother Barbara Schmid and my late grandmother Ernestine Haidinger for being role models of female strength in truly difficult times and defying any hardships to build a better future for their children and grandchildren. Thank you.

Certification

This thesis entitled of “*The Duality of Tensions at the Workplace for Female Leaders*” was developed and submitted to Nova School of Business and Economics as part of the requirements for the award of a Masters degree in Management.

I, Julia Haidinger, officially affirm that this dissertation was wholly developed under my own work unless stated otherwise through references.

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October, 2016

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1. Introduction

In the past years, the scarcity of women in top management has triggered a lively discussion about women's progression at the workplace. In fact, the terminus gender remains to be closely connected with the females' weaker position in the labour market. The conservative perception of men being the main bread-makers is still deeply embedded in different cultures and industries around the world (Hook, 2010). As a consequence, leadership remains a male prerogative across all industries including corporations, military and politics (Van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Although women are earning more university degrees nowadays than fifty years ago, research conducted by the Peterson Institute for International Economics (2016) showed that nearly one third of companies do not employ any women on their boards or any other C-suite jobs.¹ Therefore, when it comes to publicly traded companies, women still try to succeed in a man's world. According to a recent McKinsey study (2016)², there are only modest improvements and women remain to be underrepresented at every level of the corporate pipeline, with the greatest disparity at the senior level. Although a few women manage to break through the glass ceiling, they continue to experience separation from the highly-sought after top-management positions. Subsequently, female high potential are hindered to move up the ladder due to firmly entrenched barriers and prejudices at the corporate level. What is more, many women are forced to leak out the talent pipeline and settle for less pretentious roles or opt out the workforce due to immovable barriers (Gender Advisory Council, 2008). This perpetuates a vicious cycle of disempowerment of women at the workplace as stereotypes are reinforced in society. At the same time, organisations around the world are confronted with the lack of women in leadership positions and continue to face financial and competitive disadvantages (European Commission, 2012). In fact, research has shown that women in leadership bring many benefits to corporations

¹ Noland, M., Moran, T., & Kotschwar, B. R. (2016). Is Gender Diversity Profitable? Evidence from a Global Survey. *Peterson Institute for International Economics Working Paper*, (16-3).

² McKinsey (2016), *Women Matter*. Available at: <http://www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/women-matter>

(McKinsey, 2016). For instance, extensive research by the consultancy McKinsey and Company (2016) has demonstrated that companies with a high representation of women are able to improve their performance due to the variety of different leadership styles.

The main purpose of this paper is to give a comprehensive account of tensions experienced by female leaders and to understand the meaning of these tensions for women. Finally, a framework of coping mechanisms and corporate solutions is presented in order to resolve those tensions.

2. Problem

According to Helfat et al. (2006), female executives in top management positions were almost non-existent from the 1970s to the early 1990s. This might be explained as traditionally male leadership theories such as the “Great Man” theory (Denmark, 1993) disregarded women as they were not assigned any leadership capabilities at this time. Schein (1973) confirmed the importance of masculine character traits in leadership and coined it the “think manager-think male” phenomenon (Schein, 1973). What is more, female leaders continue to face prejudice due to the perceived incongruity between desired characteristics of a leader and traditional female traits (Eagly et al., 2000). Consequently, the role congruity theory suggests that gender stereotypes stem from the daily confrontation with traditionally sex-typed social roles such as the woman as a homemaker (Eagly et al., 2000). Although, women have advanced in the workplace during the past years and have experienced first efforts towards gender equality, the Women Matter Report (McKinsey, 2016) finds that most Western European countries still fail to move towards gender equality at the workplace. In fact, women comprise only 17% of executive committee members and only 22% of the corporate boards entail women, although 60% of university graduates are female (European Commission, 2015). Additionally, only 17% of executive committees and 18.7% of boards in the US are comprised of women (McKinsey, 2016). As a consequence, aspiring female leaders are confronted with various tensions at the

workplace arising from consolidated traditional role allocation. Previous research offers a descriptive account of the variety of tensions, women need to overcome in order to climb the corporate ladder. This paper seeks to advance our knowledge on how women experience tensions in connection to character traits, beauty and appearance at the workplace and finally, motherhood.

First, with regards to desired leadership traits creating tensions for women, Eagly and Carli (2008) found that women who are rather communal are criticized for lacking agentic characteristics. However, if they are perceived as being too agentic, they will be accused of lacking communal traits (Eagly & Carli, 2008). The scholars detected that women struggle with this kind of tension as women shall be soft-spoken due to the descriptive nature of female stereotypes. Yet, adding to the bias is a prescriptive component that demands women to fulfil assigned traits and thus, naturally stereotypes women as being nicer than men (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000). As found by Rudman and Glick (1999), women are thus likely to suffer punishment and devaluation if they fail to fulfil the gender stereotypes ascribed to them. Additionally, a double standard was detected by Eagly and Karau (2002) as women who fulfil the assigned traditional gender roles are considered unfit for leadership positions, however women portraying male traits are often penalized. Second, evidence in literature suggests that the effects of beauty and appearance on success at the workplace are twofold, as appearance can be both an advantage and disadvantage. For instance, attractive people are assigned various positive characteristics as they are perceived to be more competent and successful despite one cannot put these characteristics in any relation to appearance (Johnson, 2010). This preferential treatment is known as the “what is beautiful is good” stereotype (Dion et al., 1972). However, at the same time women might experience the “beauty is beastly effect” that suggests that attractive females who seek to fill a traditionally male sex-typed job position are usually less successful than less attractive female peers (Heilman and Saruwatari, 1979). In contrast to

attractive men who do not suffer from the same stereotyping, attractive women are expected to fulfil feminine qualities, and are thus deemed unable to fulfil the desired masculine traits for leadership positions (Hosoda et al., 2003). Finally, with regards to motherhood, literature suggests that inequality for women remains due to adherent socially imposed domestic obligations (Eagly & Sczesny, 2009). According to Hughes et al. (2009), women remain to be the primary caretakers of their households and families in addition to the positions at their workplaces. This is partly explained as the dual earner mentality is still blocked by the traditional “male breadwinner” perceptions in some parts of society (Lewis, 1992). Hence, with jobs becoming more demanding, women struggle to balance their work-life responsibilities. Even if mothers decide to stay in the workforce, they are confronted with various tensions. According to Budig and England (2001), working mothers are penalized with a significant lower wage for having children. In addition, employers often consider mothers to be less reliable and competent than their peers without children (Budig & England, 2001). However, even if women decide to put their career first, they face more trade-offs than their male colleagues as the long hours often force women to stay childless (Schwartz, 1989). Although women are just as ambitious in seeking senior leadership positions as their male colleagues (McKinsey, 2013), they are more likely to give up because they find the vicious circle of slow advancement and gender specific barriers hard to cope with.

The above mentioned tensions experienced by women are twofold, thus requiring to be viewed from a dualistic point of view. According to Abbott (2001), the concepts of duality and dualism are reoccurring in social science. Dualism was identified as portraying doubleness and usually has no overlaps but rather shows clear contrasts that are often understood as oppositions (Abbott, 2001). However, as the literature review on tensions for female leaders suggests, women often find themselves in a double bind that does not allow for a clear-cut. As a consequence, the tensions in this paper will not be viewed as dualism but as dualities as this

research paper requires the study of tensions and their interdependent character without separation (Jackson, 1999).

The above suggested findings in literature imply that it is harder for women to reach top positions and offer a descriptive account of the variety of barriers faced by female leaders. Consequently, this paper seeks to understand how women experience these dual tensions in practice and gives implications on how organisations should deal with these problems.

3. Method

3.1. Sample and Procedures

In the framework of the research, nonprobability sampling was used as this approach was more suitable for the in-depth qualitative research planned in order to understand a complex phenomenon within a small sample group (Marshall 1996; Small 2009). Criterion sampling was used within an international alumni network, with 12 interviewees participating in the study. Prior to the study, gender and level of education were established as criteria in order to facilitate the selection of suitable participants. As a consequence, all interviewees are female and hold a MBA. However, as it was aimed to create a realistic sample of the target population, participants of different nationalities and industries were approached. Informants are of European, North American, Australian, Asian and Middle Eastern descent, working in different industries, with an average age of 33,9, ranging from 27 to 50. Informants hold higher level and senior positions in diverse industries: 25% are employed in the government sector, 16% in consulting, the rest in very diverse industries such as for instance, marketing, engineering, NGO or supply chain. With regards to their marital status, 50% stated to be married, 16% divorced, 16% engaged and the rest single. Surprisingly out of 12 interviewees only 3 female leaders are mothers. To understand the individual meaning of tensions at the workplace for these women and to conceptualize their experiences, an inductive approach was adopted and grounded theory was applied. Semi-structured interviews consisting of several key questions with open-ended

format were used to collect data. This form of data collection allowed to diverge and to further pursue a response or in this case, an experience, in more detail. Subsequently, as called for by the used approach, the data collection was dynamic and followed by successive iterations. Each participant received an interview script in advance including general questions, however as the process evolved, participants were asked to recount their individual experiences regarding tensions and reflect upon their emotions steaming from those experiences. The script covered the following topics: personal introduction for characterization (age, professional path, marital status) and general questions with regards to gender-specific discrimination in the prevalent industry in order to contextualize the topic and to build trust. Next, open-ended questions were asked on desired character traits of females at the workplace, beauty and appearance at the workplace, the combination of motherhood and career and the gender pay-gap. In-depth probes were used to further identify certain patterns and to bring findings into context.

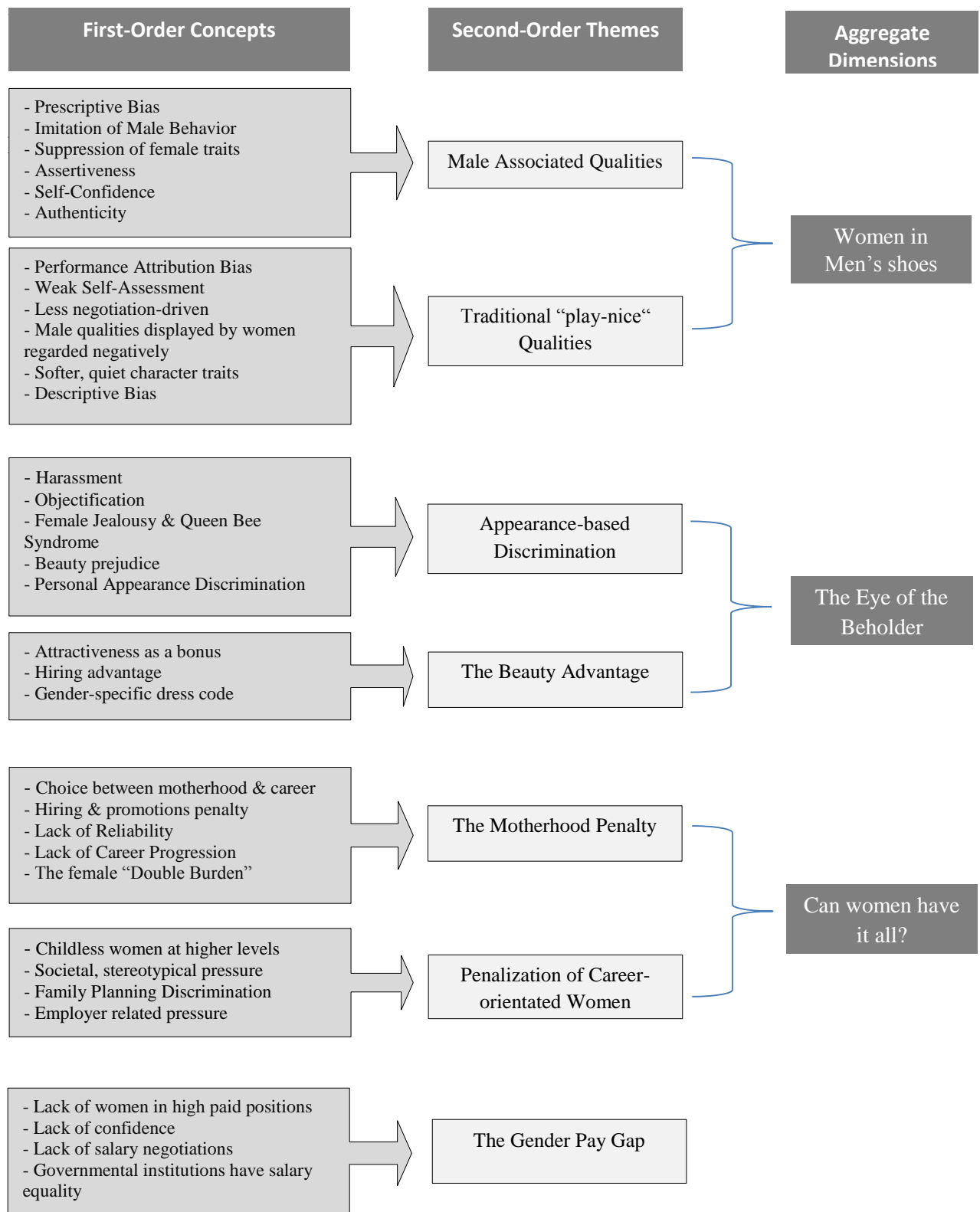
Due to geographical distances, all 12 interviews were conducted via Skype and Facetime in order to simulate face to face interviews. As argued by the scholar Rowley (2012), the usage of Skype as a qualitative research tool allows to transcend geographical boundaries, by nullifying distances and eliminating the need “to visit an agreed location for interview”. Thus, it was possible to widen the range of the sample for this research and to connect with participants around the world, breaking down the barrier of “time and space” (Burkitt, 2004). All interviews were recorded with permission of the participants and transcribed verbatim for a subsequent in-depth analysis. Interviews lasted between 20 and 35 minutes. In qualitative research, the sample size is concerned with the appropriateness and adequacy of the sample and therefore does not depend on large samples for better validity and quality (O’Reilly & Parker, 2012). As a consequence, the final number of interviews manifested itself as result of the lack of new information and dimensions emerging from the constant comparison of data, hence

conceptual saturation (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012) was reached without extracting any new information from the final interviews.

3.2. Data analysis

The methodological approach used in this paper is based on grounded theory with the aim to conceptualize data (Charmaz, 2006). Interviews and data were concurrently analyzed through the development of direct interpretation of data, in a nonlinear and iterative fashion. According to Glaser (1978), grounded theory does not test any existing hypotheses, the received data is rather used to generate theories. Subsequently, generalizations are drawn until theoretical saturation is reached (Yin, 2014). Data collection, data analysis and the development of theoretical sensitivity occurred in a non-segmented fashion and were able to influence and enhance each other due to the chosen methodological approach (Mirabeau & Maguir, 2015). Following the recommendation of Gioia et al. (2012), the analysis was organized in three steps. First, direct quotes were clustered into first-order concepts according to their commonalities. Second, the identified first-order concepts were organized into second-order themes that were defined to explain existing relationships. In a final step, four theoretical, abstract categories – aggregate dimensions - were created, classifying seven second-order themes via axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). As the data analysis progressed, it became more apparent that interviewees were confronted with tensions and implied dualities. Hence, following Collinson's (2005) literature on organizational leadership, the topic of female tensions was approached with a duality lens. This approach helped to understand how women are torn between different tensions at the workplace.

3.3. Data Structure



4. Findings

Three classes of dual tensions

First-order concepts were grouped in the left-side column of Figure 1. Consequently, this detailed list clusters direct themes that emerged from the conducted interviews. Subsequently, as a result from the interpretations and grouping of direct themes, the first-order themes were aggregated into 6 major second-order themes. With increasing familiarity of data, three aggregate dimensions were identified, providing an extensive summary of data. Figure 1 appropriates the three interpretive order, in particular the first order concepts, second-order concepts and finally the deeper aggregate dimensions (Appendix 2 provides illustrations of interview data, hence offering direct evidence from where second-order themes were drawn). The three classes of dual tensions which will be discussed in a next step, are as it follows: (1) Women in Men's Shoes (Male associated qualities vs. Traditional "play-nice" qualities), (2) the Eye of the Beholder (Appearance-based Discrimination vs. The Beauty Advantage), (3) Can women have it all? (The Motherhood Penalty vs. Penalization of Career-orientated women). What is more, a fourth category was added summarizing the findings regarding the experienced Gender-Pay Gap. However, as government data confirms a pay gap for women around the world, no duality of tension was found. In a next step, the main findings will be presented and it will be explained how second-order themes express the underlying third-order dualities.

4.1. First dual tension: Women in Men's Shoes

Two initial categories were extracted from the data as part of the interviewee's experiences with tensions: Male-associated qualities and Traditional "play-nice" Qualities.

Second-order theme (a): Male-associated qualities. During the interview, male-associated qualities such as aggressiveness and self-confidence were repeatedly mentioned to be beneficial while climbing the ladder at the workplace. As Interviewee I4 argues "[...] for a woman you have to be quite harsh, quite tough. I mean men do expect softer emotions from you, but I think

it is not appreciate when you are climbing the ladder in most organization”. Several participants shared the same experience that the prevailing leadership style at the work place connotes male character traits. Meanwhile, several comments confirmed that need for male qualities comes at the cost of the suppression of naturally female character traits. Participants argued that women are sometimes forced to imitate and “mimic what the guys are doing (I5)”, especially in male-dominated workplaces this behaviour is necessary as “[...] if you are not pushing in the same way [as men] you are definitely going to get walked over (I2)”. However, at the same time several interviewees stated that although portraying masculine personality traits is favourable to move up the corporate ladder, it is sometimes seen very negatively by both female and male co-workers as “there is less tolerance for women to do that (I1)”. Interestingly, taking the data into consideration, women who tend to be naturally assertive and confident are more likely to have a better stand in salary negotiations and hence have better chances to overcome the gender induced pay gap. As in the words of another female leader, “The thing is, men don’t have to think it through to this level because they are congratulated for identifying a problem, whereas for example I have been accused of being overall nut-picky (I10).” In fact, several female leaders shared similar experiences with perspective bias. The data found that women who claim a male position often face discrimination as they break the traditionally prescribed norms. At the workplace this prescribed bias often creates further problems such as men ignoring their female colleagues or “they just don’t show much regard for the female in meetings like no eye contact [...] (I7).”

Second-order theme (b): Female “Play-nice” Qualities. A need for gentle and soft personalities was also common across the interviews. One participant experienced that “[...] in order to earn respect you have to kind of stay quiet or be very careful of what you say instead of blowing up and getting emotional about the situation (I5)”. In contrast to the previously explained tension of “male qualities”, one participant shared her experiences and found that

“trying to be too opinionated comes across really negatively (I2)”. This phenomenon can be explained by descriptive stereotypes that ascribe certain characteristics to women. Taking the experiences of some interviewees into consideration, it becomes apparent that many women are still conforming to traditional gender stereotypes. As in the words of another female leader, “[...] So over time I realized maybe what I should do is to put in a softer or nicer way that does not affect them so badly (I3).” As a consequence of following the expectations of traditionally female character traits, many women do not tend to put themselves forward as much as their male counterparts and are hence less prone to claim credit for success. One participant (I6) for example stated that “a lot of females are too modest [...], so males ask for 65 grand Canadian dollar, but females just ask for \$48.000”. Additionally, the data points out that women with ascribed female traits tend to not only negotiate less in comparison to their male colleagues and women with male leadership traits, but they also have a weaker self-assessment. As another informant pointed out “[...] when women look at job postings, if you don’t meet nearly 100% of the criteria, they won’t apply - however if a men looks at it and he only has 60% of the qualifications he will apply (I1).”

Duality I: Women in Men’s Shoes

People assume that women and men can be assigned typical traits and behaviours (Broverman, Vogel, Clarkson & Rosenkrantz, 1972). Our findings affirm that different traits are associated with men and women. As experienced by our interviewees, masculine attributes are more likely to connote leadership ability. Consequently, women risk experiencing a clash between these two sets of associations. Traditionally, women are expected to naturally display communal qualities such as soft-spoken manner or kindness. In contrast, men are ascribed qualities that convey effective leadership and self-confidence. As a result, female leaders get caught up in a double bind (Elsesser & Lever, 2011). One of the participants shared that “there is a double standard, men being confident and telling it like it is and women being – and I heard this word

at the workplace a few times – women being bitchy, and so I noticed when women say what they think they are perceived as wingy or negative (I10).” Thus, if women are displaying female attributes, they do not fulfil the typical qualifications that are ascribed to a leader in the mind-set of people. However, if they are highly assertive and agentic, theoretically fulfilling all desired leadership traits, they may be criticized for lacking female attributes. Moreover, another participant stated, “[...] so I actually have two male sales people with me. That helps, because if you are just an Asian young women standing there, I think some people might not feel comfortable to talk with you (I6)”. It can be concluded that the impression prevails that women do not have what it takes to fill high level top management jobs – regardless of their traits.

4.2. Second dual tension: The Eye of the Beholder

The second major tension investigated in the scope of this research was beauty and appearance. Data showed that it depends on the employer whether appearance is an advantage or disadvantage. Moreover, it is important to note that participants repeatedly stated that in this framework the general appearance of a woman is more relevant than individual beauty per se.

Second-order theme (c): Appearance-based Discrimination. Discrimination against women goes as far as decreasing one’s judgement of a woman’s ability and professional skills at the workplace due to her physical appearance. As experienced by one respondent during an interview with a recruiter, “[...] she is an attractive woman, she does not know what she is doing (I4).” Or another pointed out, “[...] in some organizations I have worked if you are not or if you are almost too good looking people don’t take you seriously.”, but at the same time arguing that, “there is kind of an expectation that women are a certain level of attractiveness (I1).” Hence, women are confronted not only with a beauty prejudice but also with personal appearance discrimination. Moreover, some employers give clear directions on how they want their female employees to dress themselves at the workplace. As pointed out by one interviewee that “we were told during the introduction week by a manager, ‘you are a girl, you are in the

marketing industry. For people clients and even journalists to take you seriously, you need to dress in a way they take you seriously, so very formal clothes, have an appearance. But at the same time they told me if you wear heels, a lot of people are intimidated by girls that walk in heels (I3)". Informants also highlighted that appearance discrimination goes even further as sometimes women are subject to objectification and in some cases even sexual harassment. These tensions create a very hostile and uncomfortable working environment for women. As experienced by one of the participants, "[...] so in my last job I had three bosses who were inappropriate towards me (I1)". In the words of another women who experienced sexual harassment from a homosexual male colleague, "He would just come up and pat my bottom and say: Don't worry darling, you are safe with me (I10)". Furthermore, several participants stated to have experienced interpersonal rivalry with other female leaders often stemming from sexist jealousy known as Queen Bee Syndrome³. As experienced by one of the participants, "And she got me in this room and started screaming at me and was accusing me of all sorts, and I realized the weeks leading up to it and that was the Queen Bee - I had a lot more experience than her, was more attractive than her, slimmer than her and I was working in an office with her husband (I4)" As in the words of another participant, "Women can create a lot of problem for each other, I would be more afraid of a female leader as a women then a male leader, because women don't tend to help each other (I11)."

Second-order themes (d): The Beauty Advantage. Experiencing advantages due to individual appearance was found to be another tension within this framework. The findings show that women are under pressure to meet their employers' standards of beauty and follow the dictated dress-code, as this subsequently, can be used as an advantage at the workplace and trigger favouring behaviour from colleagues or superiors. As one of the participants highlighted that

³ Definition: The Queen Bee Syndrome describes a women in a position of authority who treats other women unfairly due to their gender (Dobson, R. and Iredale, W. (2006). "Office queen bees hold back women's careers").

“sometimes I have seen where maybe women dressed a little bit more provocatively and entice males to look at them more favourably (I7).” In general, attractive applicants are rated as more qualified than unattractive applicants when applying for employment. Hence, the physical attractiveness bias can also be found in the hiring process. As in the words of one participant, “I had a boss in the beginning [of my career] who said she got in a lot of trouble, well not a lot of trouble, but people said she only hires the attractive girls”. She further added that if employees do not follow the dress codes of their employer, they risk to be “moved sideways way from her job (I10).”

Duality II: The Eye of the beholder

This study determined that in fact, women are confronted with a beauty bias at the workplace. In particular, the shared experiences of the participants showed that employer and colleagues make certain assumptions regarding other attributes based on the physical appearance of the female. Thus, depending on personal preferences of an employer and the overall organizational culture, appearance is either regarded as an asset or liability. Subsequently, creating an unpredictable duality of tension for female leaders. In fact, beauty prejudices go as far as that attractive women will benefit in stereotypical female positions such as HR or marketing. As experienced by one participant “[...] especially in recruiting, people seem to be more attractive if you are in a role where you are trying to recruit people (I1).” In contrast, however, in stereotypically male dominated industries, attractiveness will harm females due to heightened female signals. As concluded by one interviewee “we worked very much in the commercial sector, which is very, very male dominated. They would see an attractive women as not very competent. (I4)”. Thus, the research suggests that physical appearances can be both detrimental and beneficial to female leaders depending on the wider environmental context. Consequently, it is important to note that females often find themselves stuck between the clashing, dual tensions, experiencing difficulties to break free.

4.3. Third dual tension: Can women have it all? The Family-Career trade-off

Women are torn between their personal goals of starting a family and their professional aim to climb the career ladder. The combination of motherhood and career creates a severe tension for female leaders who struggle to have it all.

Second-order theme (e): The Motherhood Penalty. Until today, motherhood is considered as a disadvantage for career advancement. This was also confirmed by the vast majority of the participants of this study. In particular, as advancing upon their career path, women struggle to combine motherhood with a successful career. Thus, female leaders are forced to make a choice between motherhood and career at some point. As stated by one participant, “I think the hardest choices will be at some point, choosing either between a job versus being at home with your family and being as involved as you want to (I5).” However, some informants still argue that women are able to have it all, although not at the same time. What is more, when being asked about discrimination of mothers at the workplace, informants state lack of career progression as one of the biggest challenges. Consequently, one of the respondents noted that “I do have two friends though one of them recently went on maternity leave and she got looked over a promotion when she was pregnant because of that (I10).” In addition, women do not only get discriminated against because of potential family additions but also because mothers in general are considered to be less reliable because “they would not travel and won’t be able to take on this responsibility (I3)”. As a result, female career women often decide to “naturally pull out of the career (I1)” in order to take care of their families. Finally, several of the interviewed women experienced a double burden and increased pressure to manage a household and complete the duties on the job. One interviewee shared one experience: “the pressure [is] you want to be with your family especially as a mum I am very close to my daughter, and you know you sort of feel, I am away they don’t know what to eat, so that kind of thing, so you definitely have more burden and pressure from family (I6).” Moreover, some companies do not have the necessary

systems in place to support working mothers on their career advancement. As argued by one participant that, “it is harder because the top management wants to schedule a meeting at 8 pm, they don’t care if you have children at home or not (I8).”

Second-order theme (f): Penalization of Career-orientated Women. Now one might assume that career women without children might experience less tensions. By contrast, many female leaders experienced that women are only able to move up the career ladder at the cost of not having children. As stated by one of the participants, “So I think having two very motivated career people makes it harder to have kids. I think I have three different co-workers that are all married and have chosen not to have kids (I5).” In addition, women who wish to pursue a career face pressure from society to fulfil their traditional gender roles. As mentioned by one of the respondents, “He said, ‘you being a girl I don’t think you will be able to do it. I think you should stay home, focusing on family and try to enjoy yourself’(I3)”. The data also confirmed that women are still subject to discrimination due to prospective pregnancies. As in the words of another respondent, “[...] there was pressure from my boss to find out if they are thinking about having children (I4).”

Duality III: Can women have it all? The Family-Career trade-off

As stated by experience by a participant, “I have been working part-time for 10 years (I12)”, women continue to be the ones who interrupt their careers or change into part-time, in order to have children. On contrary, females thriving to become the leaders of tomorrow are often obliged to dismiss their quest for children for the sake of their career. Thus, women are penalized somewhat regardless the path they are embarking on. This duality creates major tensions for women as they are confronted with the fateful decision of making a choice at some point in contrast to men who seem to have it all. Remarkably, the answer to the question whether women cannot have it all, varied over the interviews. However, participants agreed that women cannot have it all “at the same time (I10).” In addition, reflecting on the challenges within each

tension, working mothers and career women alike face a double burden and severe work-family trade-offs.

4.4 Fourth Tension: The Gender Pay-Gap

The gender pay gap is a phenomenon that mainly discriminates against women in the labour market. A lot of research on this topic was conducted by scholars, international organizations (e.g ILO), the EU and national governments, showing that causes are complex and interrelated. This study did not aim to find the percentage of the gender pay gaps in the various country, as research in this area is plenty. However, participants were asked to share their individual experiences with regards to the gender pay gap. The majority of participants has experienced this pay discrimination in some way or the other. Data showed that participants who are employed by governmental institutions however do not face this kind of discrimination due to the existent efforts to establish salary equality within the framework of national governments. Several participants named different factors that contribute to the gender pay gap. As in the words of one respondent, “And a lot of times I think it is attributed to the way they negotiate and maybe they don’t ask for a higher salary (I7).” Another female leader stated that “[...] it goes back to my one comment that women do not ask for it. Women are much more likely to go into the workplace in Canada and have the perception ok I start with a starting salary and lower my expectation but I will demonstrate my qualification and I will work up (I2).” One can therefore conclude that women’s lack of confidence to negotiate their way up contributes to the low pay trap. As stated by one female leader, “I know that men would get paid more because men were chosen for more senior positions. It was expected that a men would fill those positions, women would not (I4).” To conclude, as long as women are not represented in the same top positions as men, the gender gap will not cease to exist.

5. Discussion and Solution

The analysis and findings indicate that women are subject to many kinds of gender specific discrimination in their working environment. Hence in this section, practical and concrete solution proposals are made that should be adapted by organisations in order to create a safe working environment that promotes female advancement in the workplace. Next, solution approaches will be given for each tension individually and for the duality as a whole. It is crucial to consider and understand the two opposite demands of dual tensions. Considering the dual tensions faced by women, it becomes apparent that it is difficult for female leaders to conform to meet the general expectations surrounding them. The proposed solution framework (*see Table 2*) does not attempt to resolve all dualities or to stress one tension more than the other, it rather gives implications for the introduction of female friendly policies that promote gender equality, change the corporate culture and create a friendly working environment for women to evolve.

Table 2: The dualities of tensions for female leaders at the workplace

Tension I	Tension II	Duality
<p><i>Male Associated Qualities</i> Explanation: Some organizational cultures regard male associated qualities in women as negative, although these traits were repeatedly mentioned to be important to climb the ladder. Implications:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create fast-track leadership programmes for women • Buddy Network to eliminate gender exclusion • Awards for female accomplishments 	<p><i>Traditional “play-nice” Qualities</i> Explanation: Women are often forced to portray traditionally female, nice character traits. Implications:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reverse mentoring embraces female character traits in corporate culture • Negotiation coaching sessions for female employees • Collective enablers who support diversity 	<p><i>Women in Men’s shoes</i> Explanation: Women are torn between fulfilling traditional character traits and adopting male associated qualities to compete with male colleagues at the workplace. Implications:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More engagement and support from men is necessary • Inclusiveness Programs to raise awareness among men about difficulties faced by women • Board & CEO commitment to gender diversity and gender-equality goals • Use data to create transparency
<p><i>Appearance-based Discrimination</i> Explanation: Women’s abilities and skills are judged and evaluated due to their physical appearance. Implications:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anonymous reporting system for discrimination and harassment • Disciplinary procedures • Open dress-code 	<p><i>The Beauty Advantage</i> Explanation: Conforming to mandated dress codes and expectations might give women an advantage. Implications:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appoint a person in HR to ensure transparency during the hiring process • Rotating job HR boards overseeing the hiring process • Demanding resumés without photo 	<p><i>The Eye of the Beholder</i> Explanation: Women experiencing pressure to avoid beauty prejudice and discrimination while meeting employer’s appearance standards. Implications:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top-down non-tolerance policy regarding, sexism or appearance-based discrimination of any kind. • Mandatory session on gender discrimination for every employee

<p><i>The Motherhood Penalty</i> Explanation: Women with children face more disadvantages than childless women in their career progress. Implications:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible Work Schedules • Transparent and Collaborative Career Mapping 	<p><i>Penalization of Career-orientated Women</i> Explanation: Career-orientated women are often penalized by societal stigma and forced neglect their family planning. Implications: Reduced-Hour Career for both genders</p>	<p><i>Can women have it all? The Career-Family Trade-off</i> Explanation: In contrast to men, females struggle to combine motherhood and career and have it all at the same time. Implications: In reality, it will be difficult to escape the Career-motherhood trap – major changes in the societal mind-set and corporate cultures are required.</p>
<p><i>Gender-Pay Gap</i> Explanation: The gender-pay gap describes the average difference between men's and women's aggregate hourly earnings. Implications:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement Pay Transparency • Eliminate Negotiation (fixed yearly raise) or support female negotiation 		

First, implications are given for the duality of male associated qualities and traditional “play nice” qualities. Within these dual tensions, organisations should learn how to shift the focus flexibly in order to respond to environmental demands without any prejudice. One of the biggest challenges for females at the workplace is that the gap of female leaders in senior positions traditionally favours male leadership traits. However, the findings suggest that sometimes it is seen very negatively if female leaders portray character traits that are traditionally ascribed to men or adopt these to climb the ladder easier. Therefore, the following implications are given to create acceptance and tolerance of male associated qualities in women.

(1) Organizations should create *fast-track leadership programmes* for women. As a consequence, more women, who naturally display traditionally male associated qualities such as assertiveness, will be found in leadership positions. Programmes like the one mentioned above will help to dissolve the prescriptive bias. Subsequently, male executives become more accepting of determined women in senior positions while these women smooth the path for other women trying to get to those positions. (2) In order to eliminate the problem of gender exclusion due to male dominated senior levels, a *buddy network* should be implemented. Organisations need to make diversity and gender equality an important aspect of their organisational culture. Matching male senior leaders with future female leaders of the talent

pipeline for two to three years allows to create visibility of female talent internally. Moreover, male mentors should be hold accountable for the success of the assigned female leader, in order to motivate mentors to take interest in the development of capabilities of female leaders and the expansion of a diverse network. (3) An *awards programme for female accomplishments* highlights the capabilities of female leaders and triggers the interest of male executives to cooperate and mingle with female top talent.

Moreover, organizations need to change the perception that female leaders are weaker and create tolerance for diverse leadership styles. Organisations need to re-educate their employees to eliminate resistance to women's leadership and free themselves of the descriptive bias. Thus, organisations should consider to implement the following policies: (1) *Reverse mentoring*⁴ allows organisations to pair males who have been identified as future leaders with female top leaders. Participation in such a programme does not only create visibility for female leaders but also educates a new generation of male leaders who are more accepting of female leadership styles. In addition, reverse mentoring allows to break down the unconscious bias and prejudice. Furthermore, male future leaders in training will become more congruent with the female characteristics and the tendency of viewing women less qualified to fulfil leadership roles, will slowly disappear. (2) The majority of participants of this research automatically linked the gender pay gap and lack of female promotions due the lacking drive for negotiating their way up. Therefore, female employees should have access to *negotiation coaching sessions* at the workplace. As a consequence, the implementation of this programme will be mutually beneficial for both parties as women will also be able to use their new negotiation skills in everyday business interactions. (3) *Collective enablers*⁵ should be appointed, supporting diversity and gender equality on different levels. Moreover, *key performance indicators* (e.g female executive turnover) should be established in order to include women in talent promotion

⁴ An example for successful, reverse mentoring is the company IBM that pairs male mentors with female talent.

⁵ As suggested by McKinsey & Company (2013), *Women Matter 2013*

pipelines. The indicators have to be communicated quarterly by the board in newsletters or during town-hall meetings.

Finally, as mentioned above, the aim is not to eliminate the duality of different character traits as a whole but to dismiss prevailing leadership styles by creating a more accepting organizational culture. Thus, the implementation of *inclusiveness programs*⁶ allows to build awareness among men on the difficulties faced by their female colleagues and how it feels for a “Women in men’s shoes”. The newly gained awareness of women’s issues will remove the unconscious biases. What is more, it is important that CEOs and the board are involved in changing the corporate culture and promoting gender diversity and gender-equality goals. Thus, town hall meetings and newsletters should be used to promote these topics. Using data of already successfully implemented programs and policies will help organisations to create transparency and understanding for the new family friendly corporate culture. By implementing the above mentioned policies, organisation will be able to minimize the potential for prejudice against female leaders, as the expectations that people have about leaders will be changed. An open-minded organizational culture will create an environment that accepts diverse character traits and leadership styles.

The in previous sections presented data suggests that physical attractiveness and certain clothing styles especially disadvantage female leaders because in contrast to male leaders, these variables are used to weight a female’s ability at the workplace.

First, it is crucial to dissolve appearance-based discrimination at the workplace as this discrimination mostly leads to the unfair judgement of women’s skills at the workplace and creates other serious tensions. Thus, (1) an *anonymous reporting system* should be implemented that allows women to report any kind of objectification or harassment. Consequently, the information should be handled confidentially and clear action should be taken against the

⁶ As suggested by McKinsey & Company (2013), *Women Matter 2013*

causer. In addition, victimisation has to be avoided at all cost. The beauty prejudice in the workforce has become more profound. As findings suggest appearance discrimination, however, is not limited to just physical attractiveness. In fact, women are often subject to gender-specific dress codes. As a consequence, organisations should widen the (2) *female dress code policy* and encourage comfortable, but still professional clothing.

On the contrary, as investigated within the second tension, beauty and appealing appearance is sometimes used as female advantage during the hiring process or even employment. According to Forsythe et al. (1985), appearance has a significant effect on the outcome of interviews. Therefore, organisations have to assure to follow (1) *a merit based recruiting system*. Hence, an employee of the HR team shall be appointed to ensure transparency during the hiring process and to hold the hiring managers accountable in case of unfair preferential treatment. Moreover, *rotating HR boards* allow to oversee recruitment of new talent and ensure that beauty prejudices do not play a role. What is more, demanding (2) *resumés without the submission of a photo* allows HR managers to take a decision solely on qualification without giving priority to appearance. Finally, these dual tensions show that women experience beauty prejudice and discrimination while they are still expected to meet employer's appearance standards. Meanwhile, attractiveness continues to create major problem for women at the workplace. Yet, beauty and appearance is something subjective hence lying in the eye of the beholder. Therefore, *a top-down non-tolerance policy* regarding sexism and appearance-based discrimination of any kind is needed and has to be supported by top management. Moreover, change management strategies should clearly include zero discrimination goals. Taking the findings into consideration, it seems that men sometimes do not understand the dimensions of problems created by appearance-based discrimination. Therefore, each employee should attend *a mandatory session on gender-specific discrimination* at the workplace. These sessions do not

exclude the participation of an organisation's board and top management. The organisational culture will only change if every management level is supportive of it.

Taking the findings into consideration, it became apparent that both working mothers and career women without children are confronted with major tensions. Consequently, many women feel forced to leave the talent pipeline as soon as they start having a family. According to Eagly et al. (2000), this behaviour might be triggered due to gender stereotypes that manifest the men as breadwinner and the women as the homemaker. Some interviewees stated that one of the most demanding challenges is to manage a household and family and attend to challenges at the job with the same amount of dedication and time. However, *part-time arrangements* are considered not to be compatible with the defiances of a top management career. As mostly women accept these kind of arrangements, it can definitely be considered as a barrier to career advancement. Society has to rethink its traditional allocation of gender roles and only then organisations are able to implement family friendly policies on a big scale. Nevertheless, organisations should try to break down these barriers and increase the retention rate of working mothers by implementing (1) *flexible work schedules*. By offering employees 10 days of remote work per quarter, which amounts to 40 days a year, female employees are allowed to complete important projects while working from home when children are sick. To avoid that women lean back as soon as they think about starting a family, organisations should engage in (2) *career mapping*, as this will allow women to adjust and redirect their career direction on a yearly basis. In addition, this programme will remove the risk of women not being aware of promotions or upcoming advancement opportunities.

By contrast, childless career-orientated women are often confronted with societal stigma of not having a family as women in many countries are only believed to find fulfilment in the traditionally for-seen role of motherhood. Nevertheless, organizations are not able to change the societal stigma on its own. Considering the demographics of our interview sample, it

becomes apparent that many female leaders decided in favour of a high career and against having children, therefore often feeling urged to decide for one or the other. In general, the current performance model requires women to make major sacrifices in order to be available around the clock. Therefore, (1) *reduced-hour careers* for both genders would allow a more efficient combination of motherhood and career. Yet, organizations need support from local governments to successfully introduce for instance a 6 hour work day like the Swedish model. Finally, the duality of these tensions is difficult to resolve as it is not enough to reform the corporate culture. Traditionally for-seen gender roles need to be challenged and society's conservative perception of the female role needs to undergo transition. Only if all collective and individual factors are challenged, women might be able to have it all at the same time. Yet, it will take decades until women are able to escape the career-motherhood trap.

According to data published by the world economic forum, it would take 118 years in order to close the global gender pay gap.⁷ More than ever, organisations should consider the following recommendations. First and foremost, a *pay transparency scheme* should be implemented, in addition retaliation against employees who discuss wages should be prohibited. Moreover, the establishment of a transparent meritocracy rewards those who are the hardest workers regardless of their gender. Second, organizations should thrive to *eliminate negotiations*, as proven by the findings of this study, women are less likely to negotiate their salary but tend to accept proposed compensation. A clearly formulated pay scheme however will not favour men simply because of their more aggressive negotiation style.

6. Limitations

This research has a number of limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, one drawback of this research is that the tension “Motherhood Penalty” might not have been fully investigated and findings might be biased as only 3 out of 12 women actually have children and hence a

⁷ CNN Money (2015). *U.S. gender pay gap is getting worse*.

limited number was only able to share their first hand experiences. Therefore, further research should be conducted with an even sample of women with and without children. Second, a key limitation of the research is that the proposed solutions do not solve the tension of motherhood and career completely. Although the proposed solutions might be helpful, changes in law and society have to be implemented first in order to cause effective, lasting structural changes. Moreover, the fact that the tensions were explicitly mentioned in the interviews may have influenced the interviewees to respond in a certain way and issues of personal biases might have impacted the discussion of the research. Further research might encourage open questions regarding experienced tensions, giving the opportunity to find unknown challenges for female leaders from different countries.

7. Conclusion

From the research that has been conducted, it is possible to conclude that female leaders are confronted with a variety of tensions that slow down their career advancement in the workplace, thus, explaining the low number of females in top leadership positions. In addition, this study was designed to understand how women interpret the meaning of tensions within this framework. The findings of this research are quite convincing, and thus the following three dual tensions were investigated: “Women in Men’s shoes”, “The Eye of the Beholder” and “Can women have it all? The Family-Career trade-off”. What is more, the tension of the Gender-Pay Gap was added to the table as female leaders shared their experiences during the interview process. In a final step, key implications were given in order to help organisations to handle the dual tensions with higher flexibility at the workplace. It is crucial to change an organizational culture to become a more female friendly organisation in order to allow more women to advance to top management positions.

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